"It's time that makes a family, not just blood": Fae Myenne Ng's *Bone* as Reversed *Bildungsroman* and Bicultural Identification

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Abstract

Asian American novelists endeavor to portray socio-cultural predicaments and ambivalences encountered by the Oriental migrants. This paper intends to demonstrate how *Bone*, Fae Myenne Ng's debut and remarkable novel, deals with the transmutation of the protagonist Leila's initial defiance to subsequent identification of her biculturalism, specifically Chinese and English. Leila's ambivalence derived from living in Chinatown is an epitome of almost the whole Chinese American community. This novel undoubtedly illustrates the internal struggles of the Chinese migrants. This analysis subverts the conventional *bildungsroman*, novel of formation, by highlighting the reversed temporality—Leila's reminiscence, from adulthood to childhood. Leila's memory facilitates and ameliorates the cultivation of her bicultural awareness and subjectivity. The memory encompasses the ingrained Chinese culture—gestures, preferences—within Leila's consciousness and subconsciousness, the interaction with Mah and Leon—her mother and stepfather respectively—and also the guilt and shame germinated out of her younger sister Ona's death. Thus, as the paper shows, it is through "minifying" physical growth that Leila grows up mentally throughout her groping years.

Keywords: Fae Myenne Ng, biculturalism, reversed *bildungsroman*, reminiscence.

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「時間建構家庭，不是血統」：伍慧明《骨》被視爲逆成長小說與其雙重文化認同

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摘要

亞美小說家致力塑造東方移民者所面臨的社會文化困境和內心衝突，伍慧明的首部小說《骨》也不例外。本文試圖呈現女主角 Leila 的轉變過程——如何從反抗到認同自我的雙文化身份。Leila 的內心糾結來源主要是自己所居住的中國城，也是華美作家經常描繪的場景。本文的分析顛覆傳統的成長小說(*bildungsroman*)，以倒敘回憶的手法來描寫 Leila 的成長過程——身體不斷「縮小」，心智持續成長。這份回憶包括 Leila 根深柢固的中國文化、跟母親 Mah 和繼父 Leon 的互動和妹妹 Ona 自殺所產生的罪惡和羞辱感。透過回溯過去，Leila 也逐步成長和認同自己重文化的身份。

關鍵詞：伍慧明、雙重文化、逆成長小說、回憶。

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Introduction

Richard Delgado and Jean Stefancic (2012) give a succinct and powerful statement about Asian scholars that they mostly "study immigration policy, as well as language rights and discrimination based on accent or national origin" (p. 3), which is inescapably connected to race and ethnicity. Besides scholars, most Asian American novelists maneuver racism and the process of racialization into major themes or leitmotifs of the writing tension; hence, the issue of "race" is the fundamental marrow which initiates and motivates Asian American novelists to put pen to paper. Race, as Lucius Outlaw (1990) puts much effort into its definition and ultimately decides to adopt Omi and Winant's exposition, should be taken as "an unstable and 'decentered' complex of social meanings constantly being transformed by political struggle" (as cited in Outlaw, p. 77). In other words, racial identities are as floating signifiers—fluctuating, "decentering" in accordance with flowing temporality; racism arises on grounds of political confrontation which subsequently engenders ideological manipulation by governmental institutions. E. San Juan, Jr. (2000) suggests racism "is the symptom of the general logic of capitalistic rule . . . [deriving from] the effect of commodity-fetishism pervading all of social life (including the cultural realm). This does not reduce racism to a matter of class struggle, but rather locates it *within the political economy of social practices and ideological-cultural moments* in a specific nation-state formation . . ." [emphasis added] (p. 12). Asian American novelists, therefore, are dedicated to expressing and publicizing their sufferings and predicaments—being trapped in and at the mercy of the mainstream.

Fae Myenne Ng's first novel *Bone* (1993, republished in 1994), a widely acclaimed and discussed text, displays delicately the socio-cultural panorama of Chinatown and Chinese Americans in San Francisco. *Orlando Sentinel*, a primary newspaper in Florida, extols the novel with high recommendation: "Sometimes the best, most artful stories are those told in the simplest language. Such is the case with *Bone* . . . a novel as spare, clean, and lovely as its title."[1] Chinatown, a notorious and mystical district in Westerners' ideology, is actually a ground where a cluster of Asian Americans (mostly Chinese Americans) wholeheartedly strive for their daily living and tenaciously confront with racial discrimination and oppression. William Dudley proclaims in *Asian Americans*: *Opposing Viewpoints* that "[t]he history of Asian Americans combines the immigrant's quest for the

[1] This acclaim is printed on the first page of the novel. See Ng, F. M. in Works Cited.

American dream and the racial minority's confrontation with discriminating laws and attitudes" (as cited in San Juan, 2000, p. 9). Owing to the multiplicity and heterogeneity of the Asian American history, "all talk of Asian panethnicity should now be abandoned as useless speculation" (San Juan, 2000, p. 10). Under the postmodern context, homogeneity and coherence are supplanted by heterogeneity and fragmentation. In *Bone*, the socio-cultural history and circumstances of Chinese Americans are profoundly demonstrated by the portrayal of Chinatown and the interwoven relationships within the Leong's family. Ng highlights the differences in racial identity and subjectivity in order to defy the Asian panethnicity which is enacted by the government for the ease of administration and governance.[2] To put it more critically, what is proposed by Thomas W. Kim (1999) is applicable: "[T]he novel challenges the stability and coherence of identity" (p. 41). This paper aims to argue that *Bone* is regarded as a reversed *bildungsroman* and Leila, the female protagonist, undergoes a process of bicultural identification by a means of reminiscence (temporality); in other words, the power of reminiscence penetrates the whole story. Growing up as an adult and identifying her biculturalism, Leila finally realizes that time outweighs the significance of blood bond.

Reminiscence & Reversed *Bildungsroman*

To challenge the notion of panethnicity, Ng foregrounds the biculturalism of Leila, who undergoes a process of self-recognition and self-subjectification; thus, *Bone* can be rendered a *bildungsroman*, but termed as a reversed *bildungsroman*. Though Alastair Fowler draws a conclusion that all genres "are continually undergoing metamorphosis" (as cited in Amrine, 1987, p. 123), critics are therefore always welcome to revisit a work or, macrocosmically, a genre. In order to argue *Bone* as a reversed *bildungsroman*, I would first give a brief definition in accordance with *A Glossary of Literary Terms* (2009): *bildungsroman* is a German term denoting "novel of formation." The subject of this type of novel is "the development of the protagonist's mind and character, *in the passage from childhood* through varied experiences—and often through a spiritual crisis—*into maturity*, which usually involves recognition of one's identity and role in the world" [emphasis added] (p. 229). In reference to the definition, the protagonist undertakes the passage from an innocent childhood into a mature adulthood. In addition, Franco Moretti (2000) puts forth

[2] Regardless of ethnicity, immigrants from East Asia, South Asia and so on are all categorized as Asian Americans by the government.

the characterization of the protagonist in *bildungsroman*: "[it] requires then a *pliant* character: no longer 'alone,' and still less at odds with the world, he is the well-cut prism in which the countless nuances of the social context blend together in a harmonious 'personality'" (p. 21). Without doubt, Leila's spirituality is maturing and uplifting from the beginning to the end; the passage, however, is reversed—from adulthood to childhood in form of remembrance and reminiscence, which the story is constituted. Instead of growing up physically, Leila experiences a process of "minification" which is unconventional and is even considered as a breakthrough of the paradigmatic *bildungsroman*. Leila is transmuted from a monolithically cynical person towards Chinese culture into a harmonious "well-cut prism" that reflects the biculturalism within herself by "the protagonist's act of self-questioning" (Gottfried and Miles, 1976, p. 122). Leila would not be able to transform into a "well-cut prism" without external forces—her relationships with the family, especially her mother Mah and her stepfather Leon, and Chinatown citizens. She, moreover, valorizes her biculturalism on grounds of the roles played by her younger sister, Ona; Ona's death—the pith on which most critics make comments—is seen as a parent-and-children familial linkage, from arousing confrontation to reconciliation.

Not only is Leila spiritually maturing but also, at the same time, physically "minifying," which is ascribed to her reminiscence. Temporality counts and is valued on the grounds that Leila gradually identifies with her invaluable biculturalism in a way of fragmented flashback, without chronological order. Though the reminiscence is scattered, Leila still undergoes a quest "journeying from 'ambiguous consciousness' to 'self-affirmation" (as cited in Leblanc, 2000, p. 11). She is familiar with the fact that Chinatown is her family's oldest place, beginning place, and also new China (p. 4). But she initially defies the Chinese culture in a sense of loathing and unwillingness: "I hated standing in the lines: social security, disability, immigration. What I hated most was the talking for Mah and Leon, the whole translation number. Every English word counted and I was responsible. I went through a real resentment stage" (p. 17). In contrast, flowing within her memory in the second half of the novel, Leila "regressively" realizes and acknowledges her family's love, bond, and Chinese background—in the statement of Tommie Hom, Mah's employer and target of extramarital affair: "He [Leon] loves you like a father, that's all I know" (p. 120); in Leon's Confucian backdrop and persuasion:

> There was a time when Salmon Alley was our whole world and we all got along. Leon pronounced it *"get long"* and there was something about the way the English

> words came out—slow and solid—almost like his voice was building something. It was as if he was talking about one of the Confucian virtue: loyalty or filial piety or sacred ceremony. *"To get long"* meant to do, to make well of whatever we had; it was about having a long view, which was endurance, and a long heart, which was hope. Mah and Leon, Nina and Ona and I, we all had a lot of hope, those early years on Salmon Alley. (p. 176)

What is appropriate here is to borrow Sui Sin Far's assumption that "individuals could be transformed through experiences with other cultures may have derived from Confucianism, in which self-realization is achieved through a 'process of continuously *communicating with an ever-expanding network of human relationships*" [emphasis added] (as cited in Dupree, 2000, p. 78). Leon's statements highlight the importance of the familial interconnection which might "get long" to "get along" with each other—communication as a means of "building something" concrete and tenacious is time-consuming—but hope should not be discarded. Owing to the long-lasting influential Confucianism, Asian American writers,[3] including Ng, are dedicated to sculpturing the human relationships, mostly familial bond, in their novels.[4] Therefore, the reminiscence, in Ng's profound description, is aimed at bridging the familial relationships and also guiding Leila one step forward to the identification of her ethnical backdrop.

Moving onto the interaction with the family member, Leila, as a child, already shows so much care about and pays much attention to Leon though she is always exasperated by Leon at the very beginning of the story. In reference to Elaine H. Kim's "Portraits of Chinatown" (1982), Chinatown was characterized as a bachelor society with a myriad of old men in the early to mid twentieth century. As Kim has propounded, "Gambling was one of the few recreations available to the Chinatown bachelors. For many, it was the only social outlet that offered the possibility of economic freedom" (p. 101); therefore, the bachelors are addicted to gambling. Stanford M. Lyman even reported the scenario of Chinatown in the 1950s: "By the 1950's in Chinatowns all across the United States aged bachelors . . . [wend] their way slowly from lonely rooms above the neon-lit avenue to the tiny parlors where the games of chance still offered a tiny ray of hope" (as cited in Kim,

[3] Not only China is inveterately influenced by Confucianism, Asian countries like Japan and Korea are also under the effect of this widespread ideology.

[4] See Joy Kogawa, *Obasan* (Toronto: Lester & Orpen Dennys, 1981) and *Itsuka* (Toronto: Penguin, 1992); Amy Tan, *The Joy Luck Club* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1989); Maxine Hong Kingston, *The Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a Girlhood among Ghosts*, (New York: Knopf, 1976), etc.

1982, p. 102). This scenario is depicted in *Bone*, which irritates Leila for a reason: "A group of old men stood at the base of the stairs, playing cards. The one holding his cards close had a thumb like a snake's head; he stared at me, so I gave him a scowl. . . . I never liked being the only girl on the upper level of the park" (p. 7). What discomforts Leila is that she regards the behavior, gambling, as a disclosure of the sense of loss, not simply the American standard notion as Gee mentions in his essay: "She [Leila] devalues the men because she judges them according to an American standard of work or ideal of success, believing that they should gainfully employed, working conventionally from nine to five" (p. 132). Leila's chief concern of not wanting Leon to get involved in the gambling is out of care and goodwill. When describing the lost old man, Leila brings up her trepidation: "Behind him, the gray shapes on the linoleum wall looked like shadows of faces. I didn't want to see Leon end up like that, all alone and lost" (p. 7). This pectoral manifestation is unspoken and deep-seated in Leila's heart, which also paves the way for bridging the father-and-daughter relationship and constructing Leila's self-identification.

Leila strongly feels Leon's habits arouse her discontent and irritation, but later they turn out to be significant and symbolic after conjuring up her memory. Leon is a repairman, fixing old devices and gadgets. Leila attempts to persuade Leon to get rid of his habits but in vain: "I told him fixing old things was a headache. But I was wasting my breath; what he enjoys most is making old things work" (p.13). Yet, Leila gradually realizes the significance of Leon's role as a repairman. One notable example is the fixing of the Singer machine (a sewing machine): "I saw the large black metal Singer machine on the floor by Leon's feet. It was all taken apart. On its side like that, it looked like the head of a horse" (p. 97). A sewing machine, within the familial context, is a machine which sews the cracking relationships of the whole family after Ona's death. The machine, in Leila's description, resembles a horse which is symbol of power and strength and a natural companionship with human. In Ng's deliberate arrangement, the urn with Ona's ashes is located "on the card table next to the sewing machine" (p. 101). As a result, the machine unexpectedly works hand in hand with human to repair the seams and bring the family member together powerfully and enduringly. In his essay "Deconstructing a Narrative Hierarchy: Leila Leong's "I" in Fae Myenne Ng's *Bone*," Allen Gee's (2004) remark is merely an abrupt elucidation by neglecting the subsequent psychological undercurrent of Leila: "She is entirely nonconformist, acting with an American sense of individualism or outspokenness, while in traditional Chinese family would demand that she respond with acceptance or

deference to her father's actions" (p. 130). In fact, Leila is able to penetrate Leon's heart and accept his behavior as the story goes on, which will be discussed further below.

Shifting from the patriarchal to maternal figure, the relationship between Mah and Leila seems to be splitting apart on grounds of Leila's sense of guilt to Mah. Gee fallaciously concludes that Leila treats Mah not as harsh as Leon because "Mah has adapted more successfully to American life than Leon" (p. 135). A more appropriate interpretation is Leila treats Mah leniently and decides to live with her due to Leila's guilt derived from Mah's marriage and Ona's death: "What wasn't simple was my guilt about having a better life than Mah . . . [which] she'd have to face her bitterness about her own marriages and that's what I wanted to protect her from. *Remembering the bad. Refeeling the mistakes*" [emphasis added] (p. 12). Leila endeavors to accompany Mah to get over Ona's death (the bad) and the extramarital affair with Tommie Hom (one of the mistakes). Leila, moreover, even bestows her guilt on Mah in the form of shame and regret. Leila imagines how Mah is going to retell her story when she returns to Hong Kong for a trip: "the years spent in sweatshops, the prince of the Golden Mountain turned into a toad, and three daughters: one unmarried [Nina], another who-cares-where [Leila], one dead [Ona]" (p. 24). It is clearly shown that Leila's guilt surpasses the bond with Mah, which eventuates in her suffocation and trepidation. Consequently, Leila desires to relieve and release herself: "What I wanted was to forget. The blame. The pressing fear. I wanted a ritual that forgave. I wanted a ritual to forget" (54). Gee repeatedly misjudges Leila's behavior by claiming "Leila clearly forsakes traditional Chinese filial obedience and responsibility for her own individualistic American desires . . ." (p. 130). Leila, to put it straightforward, *never* forsakes traditional Chinese filial piety and responsibility; rather, she is working hard on squeezing her time to be Mah's, as well as Leon's, company.

Hence, Ona's presence plays an imperative role in the family because she is the part of Leon and Mah, arouses conflicts and desperation, and cracks the family bond. As the Chinese old-timers believe that a child's blood and bones come from the mother and the father respectively, which illustrates the intimacy between parents and children.[5] Once Ona is dead and absent, Leon and Mah change drastically on their temperaments: ". . . Leon and Mah acted as if all they heard were their own hearts howling. I felt lost between his noisy loneliness and her endless lament" (24). As the blood bond and intimacy are based on the

[5] There is one Chinese saying similar to this notion: "A child's hair and skin are bestowed by his/her own parents" (身體髮膚，受之父母).

fact that Mah is Ona's biological mother, Mah blames herself for making bad choices which eventuate in Ona's death: "My father, Lyman Fu. Her affair with Tommie Hom. She thought all the bad luck started with her" (p. 51). Mah even interrogates Leila of why not caring and showing concerns for Ona. When it comes to father-and-daughter intimacy, the name "Ona" already exhibits the closeness with her father Leon: "Leon/Ona. *On* was part of Leon's Chinese name, too. It means "peace" in our dialect. Mah said it seemed respectful as well as hopeful. Leon was her new man and Ona was their new baby" (p. 131). Ona is derived from Leon, implying the constitution of Leon both ethnically and spiritually. So when Leon is ranting, "Ona listened. She was patient. *Ona had stamina—his stamina*—and she'd let him run his scream, and when he was done, she'd work on getting him to come home" [emphasis added] (p. 158). Another obvious example is that Ona's emotions follow with Leon's—her depression corresponds with Leon's, and Leon's animation is equivalent to Ona's. Mah, therefore, says "she was like Leon that way: *Ona had no skin*" [emphasis added] (p. 172). Ona already is a double of or even bones within Leon. Under the influence of the disastrous pain, Leon start to blame themselves: Leon blames himself for breaking the promise of bringing Grandpa Leong's bones back to China, resulting in the loss of Grandpa Leong's bones and Ona (p. 50). As a result, Leon endeavors to search for the lost bones and grave of Grandpa Leong for the purpose of "looking for a part of his own lost life, but more than that, he was looking for Ona" (p. 88). Grandpa Leong is the person who grants Leon an American identity—a fabricated paper proven entity. Once Grandpa Leong is dead, his bones, in Leon's viewpoint, haunt the Leong family of all paper proven subjects. Owing to the sophistication of identities, Leila narrates: "All I know is that in that time Ona got used to keeping everything inside, to holding the seeds of herself secret from us . . ." (p. 112). There is a clue that Ona is incapable of expressing her perplexity and failure of identifying herself. Instead, she hides secrets from the family, secrets that family members and readers will never know. Though Ona's death remains a mystery in *Bone*, it is inferable that Ona, a victimized and lost object of the bicultural shock, fails to recognize and affirm her bicultural subjectivity, inducing her suicidal action. Ona's death, therefore, engenders the loss of Leon's subjectivity since they are in one. Due to the highly intimate family knot with Ona, her death is absolutely influential, even catastrophic to the family—her death initially arouses internal struggles of Leon and Mah, and also damages the family bond.

Besides the parents, Ona's siblings, Leila and Nina, also suffer from the spiritual pain brought by Ona's death. For Leila, living with the sense of blame and guilt drives her to the

point of suffocation; therefore, she declares: "I didn't want anything to be the same. I wanted a new life, as if to say that person then, that person that wasn't able to save Ona, that person was not me" (p. 15). Leila is determined to live a new life without blame and guilt, but not without the family. As for Nina, Leila is jealous about Nina's escape to New York. But Leila discovers that Nina is haunted with the nightmare of Ona's death: "She [Nina] got time away from the fright of it; and to me, that was being free. But on this trip to New York, I saw different, I saw that Nina still suffered" (p. 15). Notwithstanding Ona's mysterious death, the secrets of committing suicide later on reconcile the conflicts and help Leila discover and identify herself with her bicultural identity and subjectivity: "I believe in holding still. I believe that the secrets we hold in our hearts are our anchors, that even the unspoken between us is a measure of our every promise to the living and to the dead" (p. 193).

Ona's death, however, is even more crucial for reaching reconciliation within the whole family by running Leila's memory once again. First, Ona's death initiates Leon to set off on self-discovery sea journeys and stimulates Mah's need of the other two daughters. After the atrocious news of Ona's death, Leon frequently sets off on sea journeys—the world outside Chinatown. Each sea journey emblematizes Leon's self-discovery sailing—a journey to discover his ethnical identity and subjectivity. So, Leon is complete in the process of sailing: "The ocean was his whole world: complete. A rush of wind and water. The salt taste [sic] like endless crying" (p. 150). The world outside Chinatown triggers Leon's determination of searching himself though it is precarious and lost. But once Leon is on a sea journey: "Leon lost. Leon found" (p. 62). Although Ona is absent in the family, her absence acts as a stimulus for Mah's need of Nina and Leila: "I want all my daughters home" (p. 151). For Leila, she concurs with Ona's behavior of counting as she explains: "Remembering the past gives power to the present. Memories do add up. Our memories can't bring Grandpa Leong or Ona back, but they count to keep them from becoming strangers" (p. 89). Even though the family members occasionally forget about Ona—"drunk with forgetfulness," "with [the] new guy," "with [the] gold mine of gossip"—the forgetfulness is transient. The last sentence is filled with a poignant sentiment: "But nobody'd forgotten about Ona" (p. 102). Ona is always alive in everybody's heart regardless of the drastic change of the world: "Inside all of us, Ona's heart still moves forward. Ona's heart is still counting, true and truer to every tomorrow" (p. 145). The importance of reminiscence is emphasized because of its significance of fostering oneself

mature—realizing the connectedness of the family and her biculturalism; in other words, Leila is spiritually growing but physically minifying.

Reminiscence & Bicultural Identification

The two languages English and Chinese play significant roles in engendering Leila's rejection and final acceptance of her bicultural identity. When Leila is working on how to tell Mah, her mother, about her marriage, she realizes she has "a whole different vocabulary of feeling in English than in Chinese, and *not everything can be translated*" [emphasis added] (p. 18). After Leila's confession, Mah just makes a grunt sound and Leila renders "her Chinese grunts into English words." In Leila's heart, "[t]here's power behind her sounds." Even the word "love" in Chinese denotes "to embrace, to hug" (pp. 22-23). Leila is acquainted with, but not fully understands, the subtlety and power of Chinese discourses. Since "not everything can be translated," she mistranslates, for instance, Mah's grunt as disgust and anger (p. 22). Due to Leila's mistranslations of Mah's and Leon's discourses, she is frequently involved in conflicts with her parents, subsequently causing the denial of her Chinese identity. Nevertheless, Leila finally realizes the untranslatability of the discourses should be deciphered by heart, not by speech, driving her to make a confession: "I believe in holding still. I believe that the secrets we hold in our hearts are our anchors, that even the unspoken between us is a measure of our every promise to the living and to the dead. And all our promises, like all our hopes, move us through life with the power of an ocean liner pushing through the sea" (p. 193). The secrets and unspoken are something that cannot be translated, the familial bond is formed nonetheless. The unutterable language guides the Leong's family to sail on the unpredictable sea—symbol of a society with racial discrimination and injustice and also an ethnical subject full of instability and incoherence—with promises and hopes. Leila's agitation and confusion of the two languages are effaced and superseded by the extolment of her biculturalism—capability to speak two languages and understanding both American outspokenness and Chinese reticence.

Notwithstanding the overwhelming American mainstream ideology, American-born Leila is inscribed with implicitly poignant sentiment and affinity to Chinese culture—the essences which foster Leila's subsequent identification with her biculturalism—by exhibiting her gestures, responses, and preferences. Issues in Chinatown ignite Leila's anger and hatred, so Leila is looking forward to having a reunion dinner with Nina in non-Chinese

restaurant because "the atmosphere helps me forget. . . . I wanted to forget about Mah and Leon" (p. 26). But once Leila reaches the restaurant and is ready for dinner, she has a strange and unutterable sentiment circulating in her body: "Everything seemed foreign. It felt like we should be different people. . . . We'd sat with chopsticks, mismatched bowls, braids, and braces, across the Formica tabletop" (p. 27). She feels as if the utensils used and the dressing worn were all from Chinese culture—a sense of foreignness disseminates the whole restaurant. After the meal, the conversation between the waiter and Leila also reveals her subtle tendency to the Chinese background:

> The waiter stood there, the dark plates balanced on his arm.
>
> "You two Chinese?" he asked.
>
> "No." I let my irritation fill the word. "We're two sisters." (p. 36)

Though Leila gives a negative answer and a face of irritation to the waiter, Leila follows up with a reply of their familial relationship, not their nationality or ethnical background. It is reasonable to infer that Leila does not attempt to abandon but to retain her Chinese identity. Leila's identification and acknowledgment are only masked by her parents and the Chinatown issues. As Annette White-Parks points out, "the betrayal of the ancestral homeland [is] implicit in the biculturation process" (as cited in Dupree, 2000, p. 80). Therefore, after a series of reminiscences, Leila feels relieved and comforted by sitting under her favorite photo "of two little girls walking down an alley; they're holding hands, looking back" at the end of the story. Other photos like "the grocer with the beckoning smile, the shoe cobbler, the balloon peddler" also exhibit Leila's affinities. In addition, the sounds uttered by the dining utensils are accompanied with peace and tranquility: "I listened to us eating . . . the soft suck of rice in our mouths, the click of the chopsticks against the bowls. These sounds were comfortable, and for a moment, I was tempted to fall back into the easiness of being Mah's daughter, of letting her be my whole life" (p. 193). Throughout the story, Leila is questing for the identification of her biculturalism which makes her unique and valuable.

Leon, as a paradigmatic collector frequently delineated in Chinese novel,[6] conspicuously reveals his Chinese background, which has a direct effect on Leila's affirmation of her double identities. Leon's American identity is a false one, which is

[6] Chinese, especially middle-aged and elder generations, are always depicted as collectors who preserve old and memorable photos, documents, or sometimes money in a biscuit or aluminium box under their bed. Thus, this image can be rendered a part of Chinese tradition.

sponsored by Leila's grandfather Grandpa Leong by "claiming [Leon] as his own son; consequently, "Grandpa Leong was Leon's father only on paper" (p. 50). So, Leon clings to the concept that "paper is more than precious than blood" (p. 9) if immigrants yearn for survival in America. Even though Leon does not intend for long stay, he has been trapped in America for fifty years (p. 57). As Elaine Kim has analyzed, Chinese immigrants' hope to return to China is annihilated on grounds of "the confiscation of property" and "the uncertainty of their political and economic futures in a new China" (p. 103). In light of the factual injustice and cruelty, Leon is still on the land of America, bearing a false identity. Nonetheless, Leila discovers Leon and herself from Leon's collected documents in the sense that they are both granted with double identities—the fact that drives Leila to acknowledge her biculturalism. When Leila is searching through Leon's suitcase in order to "prove" his authentic American identity, she discovers a stack of rejection letters—letters that merely prove "Leon was not the hero." The reason why Leon collects old documents is "because he believed *time mattered*. Old made good. These letters gained value the way old coins did. . . . These letters marked his time and they marked his endurance. *Leon was a paper son*" [emphasis added] (p. 58). After reading and studying the old document collected, not only does Leila realize that Leon is not the hero but she also finds that "[f]or a paper son, paper is blood" (p. 61). In Thomas W. Kim's (1999) essay, the subjectification and authenticity of Leon's identities by illustrating the collected documents occupy the major part of his arguments. One point mentioned by Thomas Kim is recommendable: "Those characteristics of Leon in excess of his official identity constitute, however, a Leon that Leila begins to know" (p. 45). But this paper argues that paper is only the blood in America, not within the family. Instead, what makes a family precious and well-connected is derived from the length of time. Time actually matters in the way that Leila is satisfied with her double identities and biculturalism when she reminisces and experiences her entire life. Leila, therefore, desires to "[gather] all Leon's papers, [burn] his secrets and maybe his answers, and then [scatter] the ashes in the bay" (p. 60) since paper is not the blood between Leon and herself. Moreover, Leila confesses: "I never forget. I'm the stepdaughter of a paper son and I've inherited this whole suitcase of lies. All of it is mine. All I have are those memories, and I want to remember them all" (p. 61), reverberating with Leon's declaration on the first page of the novel: "[I]t's time that makes a family, not just blood."

Leila does not look down upon Leon concerning the hierarchical relation; rather, she gradually treasures Leon's Chinese background. The arguments propounded by Allen Gee

are thus problematic and fallacious. Gee suggests Leon is subordinate because "Leila measures him by applying conventional American masculine standards" and "[h]er comments about him almost always lean toward the negative" (p. 133). It is pitiful that Gee does not read the text in depth and attempts to figure out the subtlety of the language. The latent meanings of the language are mostly derived from Chinese backdrop and culture, though the text is written in English. Leon is a reticent person who acts more than speaks, which suits the notion of "action speaks louder than words"—one of the Chinese traditions. Therefore, it is preposterous to conclude that "although [Leila] does not dismiss all that she recognizes as Chinese, she still privileges American values" (Gee, 2004, p. 133). To borrow Dupree's remarkable assertion, a bicultural woman "understands that it is unnecessary to choose between cultural assumptions" (p. 84).

At first, Mah's appearance and lamentation vex Leila's recognition of her blood and cultural bond with the family. When Leila looks at herself in a mirror, she has a perplexed voice coming out from her heart: "I thought about how I didn't look like anybody, not Mah or Ona or Nina. I used to be jealous of my sisters, how they looked so much like Mah. . . . There was something tropical about their bodies, a warm and easy gracefulness. My sisters were asked all the time if they were twins" (p. 154). The appearance is somehow a crack between Mah and Leila. Additionally, when Mah is indulged in her sadness and loneliness after Ona's death, Leila, neglected, vents her resentments: "I resented Mah her stubborn one-track moaning—crying over Ona who was dead, crying over Nina who was gone. . . . [w]hat about me? Don't I count? Don't I matter? There I was, the living present daughter, and Mah was hung on the other two" (p. 91). The presence of Leila is more vulnerable and forgettable than the absence of Nina and Ona. Leila is treated as an outcast in the sense that no one pays attention to her presence. The negligence of Leila causes the interrogation of her blood bond with the family and her bicultural subjectivity in America. Yet, a potent machine aids in filling up the gap between both of them—the Singer.

As one of the old-timers, Mah clings to the old objects, one of which is the Singer, mending and effacing the seam between Leila and herself. Mah tends to preserve rather than discard: "The old sign with the characters for 'Herb Shop' still hangs precariously above the door. I've offered to take it down for Mah, but she's said No every time. Mason [Leila's husband] thinks she wants to hide" (p. 20). What is Mah trying to hide? One of the most apparent answers would be the death of Ona. She is reluctant to accept the disappearance of Ona, a biological daughter who is the flesh and blood of the mother. The Singer, therefore,

achieves its significance in seaming the relationships. As the narrator talks about Mah's usage of the Singer, a sense of depression is depicted: "There was something strange about the sound of the machine, a kind of echo behind the thumping. I listened hard and then I heard it clearly, a tinny hollowness. Mah was *running the Singer without any fabric*" [emphasis added] (p. 70). The fabric symbolizes the relationship between Mah and Leon, Mah and Ona. Mah's extramarital affair with Tommie Hom and the separation of Mah and Ona engender the absence of the fabric. The machine, once again, proves to be an indispensable powerful tool in bonding the family together. Gee misjudges the absence of the fabric as the distant relationship between Mah and Leila because Mah "adheres to silence rather than verbalizing her emotions, a form of traditional Chinese behavior" (p. 135). Instead, the Singer is the connection of the mother-and-daughter relationship as Mah teaches Leila how to sew, and also they co-operate with each other to finish a new dress for Ona: "She [Mah] let me sew the long sash on the Singer . . . she sewed the dress front to the dress back and worked on the neckline and the sleeves" (p. 137). The relationship is drawing closer rather than distant to each other, and Leila's bicultural subjectivity is more confirmed.

Moreover, Ona's death is a catalyst of Leila's affirmation of her biculturalism. The death of Ona seems to be an epiphany to Leila as she depicts it: "I felt a small lightening up inside, because I knew, no matter what people saw, no matter how close they looked, our inside story is something entirely different" (p. 145). Leila becomes aware of her ethnical identities—Chinese American (both a Chinese and an American); in other words, Leila ultimately realizes the difference between a bicultural self and a pure Chinese/American. At this point, Leila extols and identifies with her biculturalism which is a treasury to her. Under the condition the new understandings and practices of race and ethnicity, heterogeneity "will lead to long-term and lasting transformation of the American racial order" (Hochschild, Weaver, & Burch, 2012, p. 8).

Conclusion

The power of reminiscence is immense and important in maturing oneself in terms of ethnical identity and subjectivity. At the end of the story, Leila is inspired by the old objects—bits of reminiscences and evidence of biculturalism. So, Leila glorifies the "oldtimer's photos, Leon's papers, and Grandpa Leong's lost bones" because they teaches her "to look back, to remember" (pp. 193-94). Leila is questing for herself within her

remembrance. Carol P. Christ explicates the women's quest as follows:

> Women's spiritual quest concerns a woman's awakening to the depth of her soul and her position in the universe. . . . [A] woman must listen to her own voice and come to terms with her own experience. She must break long-standing habits of seeking approval, of trying to please parents, lovers, husbands, friends, children, but never herself. . . . [subsequently] she opens herself to the radically new—possibly to the revelation of powers or forces of being larger than herself than can ground her in a new understanding of herself and her position in the world. (as cited in LeBlanc, 2000, p. 14)

After the interrogations by Mah, the conflicts with Leon, and the incident of Ona's suicidal action, "the revelation of powers" trigger Leila to understand herself in a novel way and posit herself in a different position—an entity with two cultures, Chinese and American. The quest is accompanied with completeness—a word hidden in Leila's neologism. In Mah's house, Leila's original place of living, there is an old blue sign inscribed with "#2—4—6 UPDAIRE" (pp. 183, 194). There is also an invented word "backdaire" at the very end of the story. The word "daire" means apartment in Turkish, which sounds reasonable to a flat locating in Leila's room. Moreover, "daire" also denotes circle[7]—a symbol of completeness. After all the reminiscent journeys she has gone through, Leila has confirmed her ethnicity and bicultural subjectivity are confirmed, implying her heart is complete with reminiscences. As Ellen Dupree suggests: "Chinese women need not reject their identities in order to assume control over their lives because Chinese morality approves change when it is clearly needed" (p. 97). The biculturalism of Leila also bridges the family relationships, echoing the title "it's time that makes a family, not just blood." Therefore, temporality, shown in a way of reminiscence, achieves two goals simultaneously.

[7] The meaning is derived from *Wiktionary*, see "daire" in "Works Cited".